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AUTHOR	Shaw, Walter B.
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ABSTRACT

Modern colleges can better serve their students if they strive to create a warm community that revolves around education and meets man's basic need for affiliation. The University of Denver is striving to develop community residence halls around the dogma of a philosophical approach to learning. The university has initiated residential programs for students in the empirical or fact-oriented sciences and in the symbolic disciplines. Staff in each of the residence halls consists of several full-time resident directors and a student staff of graduate or undergraduate students in one of the disciplines of interest. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (HS)

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ABSTRACT

Communitizing a Residence Hall: One strategy

Dr. Walter B. Shaw
Dean, Housing Programs
University of Denver

Modern colleges can better serve their students if they strive to create a warm community that revolves around education and meets man's basic need for affiliation. Traditional communitizing agencies outside the university, such as the neighborhood, the family and the church are playing a less significant role than they have in the past.

Ardrey writes that identity, security and stimulation are requirements for community formation. Nisbet believes that every true community must have a dogma, or transcending value to which each member subscribes.

The University of Denver is striving to develop community in residence halls around the dogma of a philosophical approach to learning. The University has initiated residential programs for students in the empirical or fact-oriented sciences and in the symbolic disciplines. Facilities in the empirical hall include a computer terminal, calculators, video-tape equipment, darkroom, library and seminar rooms. The symbolic disciplines hall has an experimental theatre, close-circuit radio station, film production area, dance and music practice rooms and a listening center. Staff in both halls consists of full-time resident directors and student staff that is graduate or undergraduate students in one of the disciplines of interest.

Preliminary response to the program has been quite successful.

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COMMUNITIZING A RESIDENCE HALL: ONE STRATEGY

Walter B. Shaw
Dean, Housing Programs
University of Denver

Picture a college in which students are identified by a number--where the only learning that takes place comes from books, lectures or other visual and audio sources with no possibility of interaction between the student and the professor--students come to campus only for classes and do not even know the names of other students--there is no emotional attachment with the institution: no pride nor hate; no dissatisfaction nor enjoyment, but rather the institution is more like a supermarket where a student enters to buy a commodity and leaves. This example is an extreme picture of a college that totally lacks community. Its rewards and benefits to its students are very limited, and it certainly misses its potential as an organization if its goals are no greater than merely educating an automaton.

Modern colleges can better serve their students if they strive to create a warm community that revolves around education and meets man's basic need for affiliation. In the past, the communitizing role was not necessary for institutions of higher learning because these needs were being effectively met by other institutions such as the church, the neighborhood, and the family. The permanence and security offered by them is rapidly slipping from the American scene. The lesson of community formation taught to our students has broad ramifications. Alvin Toffler, in his recently popular book Future Shock, has carefully documented many of the manifestations of the deterioration.) He calls the modern American "The New Nomad," referring to the transient relationship he has with other people and places. Man seldom is born, grows, lives and dies in the same town today. Fifty years ago the person who did not was the exception, and now he is the rule. The transient nature is also seen in some statistics generated by R. Buckminster Fuller. He stated that in 1914, the average American travelled 1640 miles a year -- 1300 miles on foot. Today the average American car owner drives over 10,000 miles a year and this excludes walking, flying or other transportation.

Linguistic styles are mingling and geographical identities are disappearing. The family is also being greatly modified by this transiance. In the stable community of fifty years ago, the child's family consisted of uncles and aunts, cousins and grandparents and close friends, as well as biological parents.

Toffler says that industrialization has "streamlined" the family and that the model family has changed from an extended unit to the nuclear family. The increasing conflict between career and family obligations is further aggravating the situation.

The literature is full of speculation and theory about what is necessary for the healthy growth of an intelligent, emotionally stable, feeling person. There is much disagreement, but also much agreement. Some areas of substantial concurrance include identity, affiliation, security, and self-esteem. Assuming the accuracy of my supposition that it is becoming increasingly difficult for these needs to be met in traditional ways, we must find alternative methods or else we may see the development of a neurotic, or even psychotic, society. Indeed, some feel that we are already entering this stage.

What is a community oriented approach as it relates to a residence hall, and how does it differ from the traditional patterns found in residence halls?

The most obvious difference is the focus. Using the community model, the positive benefit accruing to the individual arises from membership in a healthy group with certain characteristics (to be discussed later), rather than the healthy group growing as a by-product of an aggregate of adjusted individuals. This difference is much more than semantic. With the exception of certain biological or traumatic situations, a healthy group (community) will contribute to the positive growth, development and maturity of the individuals within the community. It does not always follow that healthy individuals will always contribute to a well-developed community. It has even been hypothesized that it might be possible to have a sick group composed of emotionally healthy individuals. One example of this might be seen in Golding's Lord of the Flies.

A potential and, I believe, frequent pitfall of a system that focuses primarily on the individual is the ease with which one can lapse into a pattern of dealing only with the exceptional individuals - either positively or negatively exceptional - while ignoring the broad middle group. It is now commonly recognized that anonymity tends to act counter to the positive development of a human being. It can be further assumed that neglecting a person will tend to increase anonymity. Ignoring this broad middle group will then tend to increase the anonymity of the members thereby encouraging those individuals who need greater attention to seek to become exceptional. Because of the difficulty of large numbers of individuals becoming positively exceptional through academics, athletics, activities or other ways, many will seek consciously, or unconsciously, to become exceptional in negative ways. This effort is often seen in academic failure, emotional problems or behavior. There is the story of Johnny, the five year old son of a successful businessman. This businessman often had to travel or work late and therefore was unable to play with his five year old son. On week-ends, when Dad was free, he liked to play golf, and whenever he went out with the clubs over his shoulders he would pat Johnny on the head and ask him how he was. The boy would answer "Fine, Dad," and Dad would leave. Now everyone knows that a five year old is not dumb, so one Sunday, when Dad was leaving to play golf, he asked Johnny how he was. Johnny answered, "Well, not too good. I've got this problem. . ." Immediately the clubs came off the shoulder and Dad said, "Well, I'll stay home and play with you today. How about a ball game?" Little Johnny just learned an important lesson. If the attention he deserved and needed had been given earlier, there would have been no need to create a problem. Of course, college students in a residence hall are different -- or are they?

Anthropologists tell us that an organization's allocation of time and financial resources are the best indicators of the organization's priorities. Let's look at how student personnel departments typically spend their time and money. The lion's share of both falls into individual counseling, physical health, working with campus leaders and control. This ignores the broad middle ground, regardless of what the catalogs and rhetoric may state. Student personnel work is not unlike the village which had to deal with the problem of a treacherous curve on the road into town.

After much time and thought the concerned townspeople used their money to buy an ambulance and stationed it by the curve. They used their resources to cope with the resultant problem rather than applying them to correcting the situation that led to the problem. This one thing makes the intent of developing community so different from our traditional approaches.

Environment and interpersonal interaction have profound effects on learning. Of course, this is not to say that learning cannot occur without a suitable environment and other people with whom to discuss things, but these two factors can certainly facilitate learning. Even with the body of knowledge that is increasingly illuminating the importance of these elements, higher education institutions have largely left their potential untapped. This is especially ironic when one realizes that it is relatively easy for us to have a profound effect on both environment and interpersonal interaction, especially in a residence hall. We can directly control the student's relationship to his physical environment through diet, architecture, rules, living arrangements, facilities and so on. The decisions we make, often from no conceptual framework, can also greatly influence interpersonal interactions. An example might be seen in a residence hall in which all programming is done in a social vein and staff is interested only in problems of socialization. In this case the mental set transmitted to the resident student is that this is what a residence hall is for. This cannot help but have an effect on the style and content of interpersonal interaction within the hall. Also in a hall that is totally heterogeneous in academic interests it is more difficult for a person to find someone with common academic concerns. Given these difficulties, it is easy to predict that the resident student's activity will tend to be applied toward social concerns, because that is where the community values lie and what the environment rewards.

By these last statements, do not be mistaken into thinking that I consider social growth and development, and dealing with problem areas as unimportant, but rather, these areas should only be a part of our concern rather than our whole concern, as I fear it too often is today -- either by design or accident. I contend that developing an environment that encourages learning and aids in the growth of a community

is much more important. Social growth will occur as a by-product.

Many student personnel workers today adopt the laissez-faire pattern of blowing where the student winds take them. Instead their occupational survival might well depend on their playing a more important role in determining the direction of the breeze. There is no way that we can develop any real expertise using the laissez-faire model. Possibly we can learn from a successful food service director. If he were to wait for a student to walk in and make a request for a certain item and then rush back to cook it, it would probably be sloppily done or, at best mediocre. Instead, a good food service director will carefully examine, in advance, student tastes and desires, nutritional tables and other appropriate information so that when the student walks in he can be presented with a selection of well-cooked, tasty and nutritious foods. Furthermore, the good food service director will carefully observe student reactions to what is prepared and make appropriate modifications, but he will be working from a conceptual framework and will have a well thought out strategy for action. A similar example can be made for a good teacher. We, in student personnel work and housing, must have the same good sense.

We know quite a bit already about what makes a community. This conference is further adding to our knowledge.

So, just what is needed to facilitate community formation in a residence hall? Robert Ardrey tells us that there are three key elements in societal formation. They can also be applied to community formation. They are identity, stimulation, and security. He further tells us that they have a hierarchical relationship to each other in the order in which they are stated above. It follows that the absence of these elements (or the presence of their opposites: anonymity, boredom and anxiety might be a preferable way to state it) would tend to interfere with community formation. How do most traditional residence halls score using these measures? First, identity (anonymity), high rise halls, double stacked corridors, each building like the others, student assignment made

randomly. . . the score doesn't look too high. What about stimulation (boredom)? The fact that many students see the residence hall just as a place to sleep or eat might indicate the score here. On first glance we might think we come out better on security (anxiety). After all, isn't that one of the reasons residence halls were first built; to provide a secure environment for students where they need not fear physical (or moral) danger? Of course, but security has emotional as well as physical dimensions. Ardrey again is relevant when he writes of "territoriality." In explaining this concept he states that many animals, including man, cannot feel secure unless they feel that they have dominion over their immediate environment. In short, a man needs to feel the territory is his and that he is not a stranger there. An example of this in everyday life is the case of a person who is staying with a friend. After a few days anxiety begins to build up no matter how welcome a guest he is. Ardrey would say that this is because he does not control his immediate territory; it belongs to someone else.

In a residence hall we frequently make a student feel that he cannot control his territory. Often he cannot paint his walls. Built-in furniture prevents him from arranging the room to his taste, and he must share the room with as many as two other students. We could hypothesize that a student's anxiety level would increase in such a situation. Some research done by Harold Grant and Richard Eigenbrod at Michigan State University indicated that there is evidence to support such a contention.

Edward Hall has also made some empirical measurements that would indicate some of our practices in residence halls increase anxiety. He has measured the amount of social space necessary in order for a person to feel comfortable and has identified three dimensions in social space. They are social, personal, and intimate. He has found that whenever someone with whom one has a certain level of relationship penetrates into a closer sphere, anxiety increases. For instance when someone with whom you have a business relationship enters your sphere of intimate social space you begin to get uptight. When we force two, three and sometimes four people into a relatively small physical space, it can be predicted that there will be difficulties even if they are not visible.

Two psychiatrists, Wolpe and Lazarus, contend that there are only a limited number of ways in which anxiety can be released. They include assertive behavior, sex, fatigue, and eating. This could help to explain some of the behavior problems we often see in residence halls.

So far I have only dealt with conditions that would encourage or discourage community formation. What can be done to directly contribute to its growth?

Robert Nisbet in his book, The Degradation of Academic Dogma, states that an essential element in a community is a "dogma." Of course, "dogma" is a heavy word weighted down by a number of unfortunate connotations. In order to avoid the coloration those connotations add, I will instead use a synonym -- a transcending value --, in other words, a common value, purpose or belief that is held by all members of the community. Nisbet writes of the degradation of academic dogma because he feels that the purposes of higher education and the academic life are becoming so diffuse that colleges are losing their sense of mission.

In the strategy for developing a community in a residence hall we can help to arrive at a transcending value with which all residents can identify and accept. This transcending value would also provide the students with an identity which would meet Ardrey's first need.

There are a number of things that can be done to insure stimulation of the resident students and complement the transcending value. The most apparent of these are staff and facilities.

The staff must be trained as educators and communitizers. This can be done without upgrading the quality of residence hall staff because I have found that the quality of people working in residence hall work is already generally quite high; but rather, the expectations of the staff would be adjusted and priorites changed. Probably the two most important switches in priority are from the prime focus being the dynamics as they affect the individual, to the dynamics

as they effect the group; and from a focus on crisis intervention to crisis prevention. It is impossible to expect that this change will happen at the wave of the Dean of Students' wand, but rather, it is a lengthy process of education and indoctrination whose purpose it is to develop a commitment on the part of the entire staff that the community model is superior to the traditional way of treating residence halls. There has to be a reward system that reinforces communitizing behavior on the part of the staff. Too often, residence hall staff is only visible to the dean when there is a problem or crisis. One of the most difficult changes in attitude that must be made, especially at the lowest staff level is one from being a responder to being an initiator. I don't know how often I have heard a student assistant say, "I can't plan anything until I know what the students want." Again, I think of the story of the food service director.

Facilities are very important, but not necessarily an essential element in the effort to create a true community that contributes to the student's education. These facilities should closely relate to the transcending value. The purpose of the facilities is twofold. First, they directly contribute to the active manifestation of the transcending value as well as serve as a focus of personal interaction. Secondly, they are a visible, physical aspect of the transcending value that can be shown to the "outside world." This second purpose should not be downplayed. It makes a significant contribution to the feeling of identity.

An example of one implementation of this communitization strategy can be seen in two residence halls at the University of Denver.

Philip Phenix in his book, Realms of Meaning, defines six philosophical approaches to knowledge. They are (with a brief definition): Symbolics (characterized by arbitrary symbolic structures exhibiting certain customary rules of construction and interpretation); Empirics (fact oriented, characterized by experimentation and observation); Esthetics (concerned not with kinds and classes of things -- but with unique individual objectives); Synnoetics (requires personal

involvement and engagement); Ethics (not what is, but what ought to be); and Synoptics (looks at time from a unified perspective).

After agreeing that Phenix offered us a valid conceptual framework, we determined arbitrarily and pragmatically that "Empirics" would serve as an appropriate place for a start in a test of the hypothesis. It was determined that our concern, in this case, should be directed at students majoring in, or having a deep interest in, any of the physical, biological or social sciences, or engineering.

In the fall of 1970 an experimental living-learning residence hall was established in a fourteen-year-old building that housed 420 students who were predominantly freshmen. Facilities were modified and equipment installed with the intent of supplementing students' inquiry and at the same time breaking down artificial disciplinary barriers. We felt it important to avoid equipment or a facility too closely identified with only one discipline. Instead, we sought tools with a wide range of applicability across the empirical sciences. A central feature was a computer terminal connected to the University of Denver computer center. A card punch was also installed, as were three high speed electronic calculators. A photography darkroom was constructed and equipped. Video tape equipment was purchased and a small resource library started. Additionally, a conference room, study room complex was built, using space originally in the main lounge. Not neglecting the more social side of life, a snack bar was built to serve as a place to relax and talk, and also to be a place for people to perform informally on week-ends.

All these physical changes are important but a key factor in changing the residence hall was staff. Heading the live-in staff was Charles Castellani, the resident director. His job was to coordinate the activities and assure that the facilities were used to their capacity as well as to supervise the other staff and do the necessary tasks for administering a residence hall of 400 students. Castellani had also played a key role in the planning for the Empirical hall that took place during the year preceding its establishment. The remainder of the staff included two associate directors (approximately 2/3rds time appointments) and six assistant directors (about 1/2 time appointments). The associate and assistant directors were either graduate students or

exceptionally qualified upperclassmen, studying in one of the empirical sciences. This marked a drastic reduction in the total number of student staff while at the same time requiring a greater time commitment and level of expertise of the remaining staff. Of course, the renumeration was adjusted appropriately.

The decision to focus on the co-curricular rather than seek a large number of credit offerings was deliberate (although some interdisciplinary credit courses were taught). It was believed that we could best serve the University by serving as an active complement to the basically passive situation in the classroom. We recognize that the student's relationship with an instructor in a class is generally passive in that he assimilates and synthesizes information internally. We felt that we could offer him the opportunity to apply some of these thoughts and ideas actively and use it to stimulate his creative behavior. As could be anticipated, it worked better in some cases than others.

We have seen many interesting and surprising things grow out of the empirical hall. Probably the most surprising incident happened during the second week of operation. Arrangements had been made with some computer instructors in the University to offer non-credit introductory classes in programing. At the end of the first week several students approached the Resident Director with the proposal that they be permitted to teach. Since these resident students all had substantial background with computers, the Director wisely agreed. By the time fall quarter was completed there was a mini-curriculum in computer programing being offered to students, by students, ranging from Basic through Fortran. As many as ten sections were being offered at any one time. Students soon began playing with the terminal and programing everything from blackjack to a printout of the latest playmate of the month.

James Lyons, Dean of Students at Haverford College, lived for a week on one of the floors just to see what was happening from the inside out. He observed students helping other students on class work. He noted a large number of "bull sessions" with academic substance and he noted pride in the hall. All of these can be seen in most residence halls, but Dr. Lyons said that he was surprised by their frequency. In

the first year the grade point average was a full two to three tenths of a point higher than any other residence hall, and this past fall the G.P.A. was a full one-half point higher than a comparable group of students off-campus. This is especially impressive when one realizes that selection is not made on the basis of scholarship and the majors included are generally considered among the most difficult in the university. Only subjective observations can be given in response to the obvious question of whether or not a community is being formed. The subjective evaluation is generally toward the affirmative.

This past fall term we again used Phenix' model when we initiated a second program in another hall. This time we used his "Symbolic" model but also incorporated many constructs he applied to "Esthetics." Probably this hall should be called something like a "Symbo-Esthete Hall" but instead, we are calling it our "Symbolic Disciplines Hall." We were fortunate to receive a grant from Educational Facilities Laboratories to aid us in getting it off the ground. It was the first time to our knowledge that a private foundation had funded a residential educational program that was primarily non-credit.

The purpose behind the Symbolic Disciplines Hall is not unlike the Empirical Hall. Here again we intended to create a community around the transcending value of a common approach toward knowledge. In this case it was the related areas of symbolism and Esthetics. The majors the program was designed to attract included art, theatre, music, speech, mass communication, literature and all the humanities.

The facilities are primarily interdisciplinary and conceptually arranged around three media centers: a visual media center, a performing media center and an audio media center.

Facilities and equipment for the visual media center include a preparation room, film production equipment, a photography darkroom and a variety of tools for various arts and crafts.

Resident students interested in performing can choose between a small experimental theatre, a dance studio and music practice rooms.

The central audio facility is a four channel listening system. Through this system, students, using earphones, can choose any of four program sources. They can range from a listening assignment for an introduction to music class, through a dramatic reading to acid rock. So far, a sound library of about three hundred items has been created by the students. There is also a closed-circuit radio station within the hall, staffed and programed by the residents.

Additional integrative equipment and facilities include a backpack video tape system and a resource library of approximately 2000 volumes. Subscriptions are also maintained for over 30 magazines and journals.

Some of the accomplishments of the Symbolic Disciplines Hall are easier to see than those of the Empirical Hall, if for no other reason than the nature of those activities. They tend to be performance oriented. So far three plays totaling 20 performances have been staged. Three or four more are planned this year. There is also an active theatre workshop group with members who are more interested in acting for their own enjoyment than performing. It is especially pleasing to note the large numbers of students involved in the program who are not theatre majors. If it were not for this program, they probably would not get the opportunity to produce, direct or act. Photography exhibits by students in the hall are frequent. There is a group of students working on a different arts and crafts project each week. They have ranged from tie-dying through wire sculpture. Another group is working with yoga and Eastern thought. Others are working on experimental films or sound mantages or needlecraft. A newly built snack bar serves as a congregating place. It is frequently the site of folk singing. Students have painted a mural on an entire wall of the snack bar.

The staffing pattern at the Symbolic Disciplines

Hall has been modified slightly from the pattern discussed for the Empirical Hall. This modification was made largely because of architecture. The building that houses the Empirical program consists of two wings of three floors each. There are about 70 students per floor. When the floor staff to resident ratio was increased with the pursuant upgrading of the job in the Empirical Hall, it did not pose an especially difficult problem. However, the building that was renovated to house the symbolic program was a different matter. It consisted of two wings of ten floors each. Each floor houses about 34 students. Initially we intended to have a student staff member on every other floor. It soon became apparent that the physical problems were greater than anticipated and some changes had to be made at the beginning of the winter quarter.

Currently, the hall is directed by Andrew Dinniman as Resident Director. Like in the Empirical Hall, he is assisted by two Associate Directors. On the odd-numbered floors are Assistant Directors who are graduate students in one of the symbolic disciplines. Program Assistants are on the even-numbered floors and are required to work fifteen to twenty hours a week. They are undergraduate students majoring in one of the symbolic disciplines and each serves as an apprentice to an Assistant Director in one or more of the program areas. All in all, the new staffing plan has proven satisfactory.

It will be some time yet before we know to what extent we have succeeded in our efforts to develop a strategy for building a residence hall community. We are still babes in the woods and our ideas are evolving rapidly. Initial observations make us quite optimistic, and if student use of the facilities and equipment is an indicator of success, we are well on our way.

We have learned some lessons about beginning an innovative residential program that seem to be generalizable. There are some not-so-obvious areas where much attention must be given and others that, if neglected, could create a situation where community formation is impossible.

Staff difficulties should be anticipated. This will be especially true for the lower level staff and staff who have successfully performed under a more traditional model. A possible explanation for this dynamic is that they will be facing a situation in which they have no direct experience from which to draw, whereas the temptation to fall back into a role in which they feel comfortable and have been successful is great. This will be especially true when things are not progressing smoothly.

Frustrations will also increase in a difficult situation when the superiors are unable to tell the lower staff exactly how to solve a problem. When new ground is being plowed, specific answers have to be discovered; they cannot be drawn directly from experience.

It is quite easy to promise students more than can be delivered. If the dissonance is too great between expectations and reality, disillusionment will emerge from the students. This is not a healthy medium from which creativeness and involvement can grow.

The initiator of an experimental program must be thick-skinned enough to take criticism from both sides. Traditionalists, both academic and student personnel, may feel and react defensively. The more radical will either say that it hasn't gone far enough or else that it is just a cheap ploy to buy off criticism. A clear example of the latter was seen at a recent conference of experimental living-learning programs at Lincoln, Nebraska. A group of students in attendance became very vocal in their criticism in this vein.

There are also some very pragmatic concerns that, unless dealt with, could jeopardize a new program. The moral (and hopefully more) support of certain key members of the faculty is quite helpful if the program is to be academically oriented. Attention should be given to members of both the formal and informal power structures. Their direct participation, while often potentially beneficial, is usually not essential, however, their support is. Much effort should be taken to keep them abreast of things.

People in the business office are often recalcitrant when innovation is discussed unless they see some financial dividends. A successful and attractive residence hall program can do this.

Staff of the Office of Physical Plant are key people that are too often neglected. If new facilities are added, they have to be maintained. Their cooperation is needed. This can usually be gained by pointing out the benefits to them.

A group that must be dealt with especially carefully is student government. They will probably become negative or at least skeptical if not informed and involved. A danger of a student personnel directed innovative program is that it can become a political football. If student government gains too much control, there is the danger that the focus will be directed too much at specific events and day-to-day concerns and a broad, internally consistant strategy can be lost. Specific approaches toward student governments must vary in different situations.

In closing, developing community in a residence hall has much to offer to the student seeking to find himself. It better meets his affiliation needs, especially in light of the deteriorations of the traditional communitizing agents such as the extended family, the church and the relatively permanent neighborhood.

A community that reinforces academic behaviors also aids the effort to accomplish the central purpose of the institution. Students in a community will probably be more happy with the residence hall and the college. Given all of this, it appears that community formation can be a very desirable goal of a college housing operation.

March, 1972